

The Ministry for Gozo and Tourism in Gozo

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When I was delivering the opening speech of a Seminar on "Tourism in Gozo - What Future?" organised by the Centre for Social Research of the Social Action Movement, held at this same hotel on the 9 June 1989, I said that the conference was a proof that Gozo was no longer the backwater of the Maltese Islands and that the island was moving forward at a good and sustained pace. I said that in a couple of years Gozo had captured the attention of developers, planners and environmentalists and that everyone had come to recognise the potential of Gozo in tourism. The island could therefore look forward to a prosperous future.

It can be said that these last five years have been pleasant in retrospect, as Gozo has achieved a high level of development. Tourism has certainly been one of the main contributory factors to the prosperity that is today being enjoyed by the people of Gozo.

For Gozo, tourism is undoubtedly a very important sector of the economy and its evolution has a special interest for the island. However, tourism is not a specific sector in itself and many other fields of action like transport, culture, environment and utility services are involved in its management and development. In fact, my Ministry has been implementing an interdisciplinary and integrated plan in line with the belief expounded in the Tourism Master Plan that "Gozo offers the country (Malta) its main opportunity to create a quality resort and attract a higher spending and different type of tourist".

I shall not be giving an exhaustive list of initiatives and actions taken, but it is important to mention the main policy measures and support structures that were developed during these last years, the

results thereof achieved to date and what other measures still have to be taken.

MAJOR INFRASTRUCTURAL WORKS

Improved transportation access to Gozo was one of my Ministry's main direct strategic objectives in the tourism sector. In fact increased berthing facilities at Mgarr, additions to the ferry fleet, an increased and extended ferry schedule and the introduction of a helicopter service - which is to be further improved - all helped to make Gozo more easily accessible to the visitor.

The island's road network has been considerably upgraded; the number of coaches has been substantially increased, landscaping works have been undertaken all over the island; telecommunications services have been completely modernised; the electricity supply has been rendered more reliable and stable; the sewage system has been extended practically to all the localities and it has also been extensively improved.

In spite of all the improvements made in the sewerage network, however, the system remains an old one and action is therefore now being taken to implement a Master Plan for the island whereby two of the three outfalls that discharge into the sea will be eliminated, a purification plant will be built and raw liquid waste will no longer be piped into the sea – which is and will remain one of the island's main tourist attractions.

As for solid waste, measures are being actively taken to set up a transfer station as a sustainable means of domestic and industrial waste management in Gozo. In this way, the inconveniences caused by the refuse dump at Xaghra in between two of the major tourist resorts on the island will be done away with.

Unfortunately, demand for water last summer outstripped supply, which had therefore to be better managed and controlled. This substantial increase in demand for water which is the result of a flourishing tourist industry and of a big leap in the quality of life of



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the local people necessitates tapping new sources of supply. A cost-benefit analysis has in fact been carried out to establish the best means of additional supplies. The study is being considered and a decision should be taken before long.

FACILITIES

The Tourism Master Plan says that "Gozo will be more expensive in the future than Malta and will attract tourists looking for facilities rather than night life."

In this regard it has been the accepted official policy to promote the regular upgrading of existing accommodation, to assess continuously the potential viability of new higher-notches accommodation provision and to encourage the setting up of high-quality restaurants. The outcome of this policy has been successful. So much so that

there are, in Gozo alone, 594 beds in 5 star and 4 star hotels, 40 in First Class Guesthouses, 207 in Class A1 and Class A Farmhouses and Villas with pool, 154 other beds in the same categories as farmhouses and villas but without pool, 254 in Class A1 and Class A holiday apartments, bringing the total of licensed high-quality beds in Gozo to 1249. I would remark here that tourist accommodation in farmhouses also gives the Gozitan product a distinct feature from that of Malta. It goes to show that the rural aspect of Gozo, which is certainly considerably less urbanised than Malta, is being properly tapped. In Comino, there is a 4 star hotel with 280 beds which is also being upgraded. As for high quality restaurants, there are 806 covers in the top two categories of catering establishments.

Tourist facilities, however, are not restricted to beds and covers. Aware of the lack of adequate facilities on the island, the Ministry for Gozo had undertaken in earnest the setting up of a Yacht Marina at Mgarr where today there are 92 serviced berths on floating pontoons.

I must also mention the building of the Gozo Sports Complex which, in its four years of existence, has been the venue of international activities and has also provided visiting tourists with a facility of a very high standard where they can exercise their favourite sport.

ATTRactions

The Gozo Ministry has also embarked on an extensive programme of rehabilitation, protection and preservation of important historical and heritage sites, monuments and buildings which abound all over the island. It would be inappropriate to list all such works and measures. However, the Cittadella certainly deserves a cursory mention. Ongoing restoration works, cleaning of large volumes of debris and other material, floodlighting, extension of the opening hours of Museums, opening of a crafts centre, of craft workshops, of refreshment outlets to service visitors, and interpretative facilities are all part of a comprehensive programme to make the Cittadella an attractive heritage site.

It is often rightly said that the high quality of Gozo's natural environment constitutes the island's main asset in tourism. However, the characteristics of its people, their local culture and way of life, the traditions, their food, their arts and crafts are no less attractive. Thus it is another strategic objective of my Ministry to preserve, promote and develop the island's distinctiveness and identity by encouraging and helping in all possible ways the actors in all those spheres. Here again, it would be boring to give an exhaustive list of projects, programmes and initiatives.

But it would be amiss not to make a reference to the School of Arts, the School of Drama, the School of Music, the School of Building and the Centre for Tourism Studies which were all opened these last years and which contribute to the conservation and strengthening of local traditional talents. In this regard, I should also mention the assistance given by my Ministry over the years for the holding of arts and crafts fairs and exhibitions, concerts and lyric operas, folkshows and theatrical plays, feasts and festivals.

All these fall within the Ministry's operational strategy to retain the island's identity and characteristics by promoting the local heritage. At the same time they provide entertainment and attractions to tourists, complementing in no small way the attractions of the island's natural environment.

In Gozo, we are fortunate to have perceived in time the importance of the environment on our own quality of life and on tourism. Gozitans are proud that they still have the opportunity to offer the people from the great consumer societies their island's unspoilt environment and the possibility of being alone in the sole company of nature.

In fact, this is one of the great joys of tourists in Gozo and it has become very common to see foreign visitors strolling along our coast, cliffs, ridges, valleys and fields. It is therefore one of my Ministry's aims to create a network of parkways and coastal and inland rights of ways for footpaths. These will give tourists a better opportunity to explore and enjoy the marvels of Gozo which make it truly irresistible.

MARKETING

All the above having been said, no doubt should be left that we must now promote the image of Gozo as an island of excellence in standards and quality.

Quoting again from the Tourism Master Plan "Gozo should continue to be marketed as a separate destination within the Maltese Islands". This would help to bring Gozo to the fore but would also give the Maltese Islands a larger dimension. Gozo, it is often claimed, is Malta's opportunity in tourism and should therefore be placed in the forefront in the drive for quality. As such, as the Master Plan itself recommends: "Gozo marketing and promotion should be carried out using different advertisement, newspapers and journals than Malta's campaigns". This should be the best strategy to maximise returns for the benefit of Gozo in particular and of Malta in general. It has to be clearly understood that in tourism, Gozo is Malta's best asset and the proper development of that asset is of great benefit to the national good.

Regrettably, however, a distinct marketing campaign for Gozo is not being implemented as one would expect and wish. Promotion and marketing remain in the hands of the National Tourism Organisation in Malta and there is very small input, if any, from the industry on the island.

It seems that the best promotion of Gozo are the day-trippers who, on coming to Gozo, realise that a visit to Malta is not complete without a stay in Gozo.

This however does not absolve the National Tourism Organisation of its duties to give Gozo the promotion it needs and deserves. A local Organisation within the national one will certainly be of great help to the latter and of great benefit to Gozo. Working together, under the principle of subsidiarity, ensures a prosperous future for Gozo and its people.